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ABSTRACT

During the past decade there has been an increase in the training of undergraduates to provide mental health services, as well as an increase in the inclusion of field experiences as legitimate credit courses. These trends have produced two effects, i.e., greater marketability for undergraduate psychology majors and greater use of trained paraprofessionals as community mental health care providers. An undergraduate Helping Skills Course, piloted in response to these trends as a complement to traditional courses and practica, incorporated a design based on three components: (1) presenting a conceptual framework using models of systematic skills training; (2) providing opportunities for increasing self-awareness and relationship-awareness; and (3) offering guided helping skills practice and feedback. Student evaluation responses on a paper and pencil measure indicated significant increases in ability to respond to problem statements with accurate empathy. (Author)

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An Undergraduate Helping Skills Course: Skill Development and Career Education

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During the past decade, there has been a continual increase in the training of undergraduates to provide mental health services (Cowen, Gardner, & Zax, 1967; Guerney, 1969) as well as an increase in the inclusion of field experiences as legitimate courses for credit in undergraduate curricula (Caffrey et al., 1977; Hess et al., 1978; Korman, 1974; Kulik, 1972; Shemberg & Keeley, 1976; Shiverick, 1977). These trends dovetail to produce two effects. The first is, hopefully, more relevance in the training of undergraduate psychology majors, which will increase the marketability of those not continuing for advanced degrees (Korn & Nodine, 1975; Pinkus & Korn, 1973). The second effect is the growing number of trained paraprofessionals used to meet the help-giving needs of the community (Baker, 1972; Cowen, Gardner, & Zax, 1967; Riessman, 1967).

The use of undergraduates as paraprofessionals during their college careers effects the colleges and universities, the helping professions, and the community at large. Conceptions of undergraduate education are changing. Students are being trained to provide peer counseling services on college campuses as well (Aiken et al., 1974; Leventhal, et al., 1976). Whether choosing helping professions or not, college graduates who have some training in helping skills or some

experience in a helping setting are moving into many different careers, professions, and social settings.

The Helping Skills Course described here was piloted in response to the trends described. The course was designed to complement the fieldwork experience and the traditional classroom experience of undergraduates interested in the helping professions. Traditional courses provide students with necessary cognitive frameworks and intellectual skills. Supervised fieldwork and practica offer relevant professional exposure, on-the-job training, and contacts with potential employers. The Helping Skills Course was conceived to add a third and necessary element in light of the growing reliance on paraprofessionals. The course provided an introduction to a widely applicable theory of helping, supervised practice in a classroom setting, and a forum to integrate theory, practice, and personal concerns about being a helper.

Course Structure

The Helping Skills Course was conducted during a twelve-week semester at a small urban commuter university. Classes were held weekly, each lasting two and one-half hours. The students were 13 advanced undergraduates,all working in helping settings, either as part-time employees (nursing home, welfare department), as practicum students from the university's psychology and sociology departments, or as volunteers at the university peer counseling center. Although some of the students had received training and some supervision, none had any formal training in helping skills. The instructor was a clinical psychologist who is a faculty member and who is also a clinician at the university counseling center.

The design of the course was based on three components: 1) providing conceptual understanding of a helping model and the helping process; 2) providing opportunities for increasing self-awareness and relationship-awareness; and 3) offering guided helping skills practice and feedback.

The conceptual component was built around the Carkuff model of systematic skills training (Carkuff, 1969). Egan's text, The Skilled Helper (1975a) and his Training Manual (1975b) were used. Weekly reading assignments, weekly reading reports, and classroom lecture/discussions focused on clarifying the nature of the helping relationship and the helping model.

At least half of most class sessions and frequent homework assignments were devoted to awareness activities. Sharing these activities helped build a closer, more trusting group. Experiential learning about self and others is consistent with Egan's ideas of training-as-treatment (1975). A number of sources exist for awareness activities that are relevant to teaching helping skills (e.g., Pfeiffer & Jones, 1975; Stevens, 1971; Egan, 1975b). The following are two brief examples of awareness activities used during the course.

During the first class session, students were asked to close their eyes and participate in a guided fantasy. The instructor suggested: "Imagine yourself in a recent situation where you were helpful. Try to attend to the details of the interaction. What was said? How did you feel? What did you do?" After the fantasy, students formed pairs. Following discussion of the fantasy, each pair was given some wooden building blocks and a blindfold. Taking turns, each student was blindfolded and, after thinking of a structure, was helped by his or her partner to build something with the blocks. When everyone was finished, students spent some time alone and then in group discussion thinking about and sharing what they noticed about thier styles of giving and receiving help.

Later in the course, while focusing on advanced helping skills, students were asked to form pairs, with one person asking for an unnamed 'something' in as many ways as s/he could, while the other person refused and resisted giving the 'something.' After taking turns asking and refusing, the group members spent some time thinking about their styles of asking and refusing. A group discussion followed about situations in a helping setting when the helpee refuses help or advice.

In another effort to raise students' awareness of self-as-helper, homework assignments from Egan's training manual (1975b) supplemented classroom activities. In addition, personal journals were handed in every week, including responses to class sessions and descriptions of helping interactions which occurred during the week. Students were asked to attend to all helping interactions, both formal, as might be related to their practicum assignment, and informal, with friends, family, or roommates. The journal entries also provided the instructor with constant information about students' progress and reactions.

The third component of the course, guided skills practice and feedback, focused on six skills: 1) primary level accurate empathy skills; 2) observation and attending skills; 3) feedback skills; 4) advanced accurate empathy skills; 5) confrontation skills; and 6) problem-solving skills. At least one class session was devoted to each of these skills. The class would include lecture, awareness activity, demonstration, skills practice, and feedback. Due to the limits of time and the beginning level of the students, the bulk of classroom sessions were spent learning and practicing the first three skills.

About one-third of each class session was spent practicing the current skill in groups of three. Students rotated through the roles of helper, helpee, and observer. During each class session, one group worked with the instructor and a videotape system. Every student practiced and received feedback every week; and each student received videotape and instructor feedback regularly.

Students were evaluated and graded with a contract system. Grades were given based upon how much work the student performed. The minimum contract included class attendance, weekly reading reports, weekly journal entries, and a journal summary at the end of the semester. Students could contract for higher grades by choosing to write one or two papers on approved topics and by providing a 15-minute videotape of themselves in a helping interaction. These tapes were self-evaluated and were evaluated by the instructor in the presence of the student.

Course Evaluation

A pre-post test was used to evaluate acquisition of accurate empathy skills. A paper and pencil form drawn from The Helping Relationship Inventory (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1973, pp. 53--70) was administered to students in the Helping Skills Course and to a control group of students in an experiential group dynamics course. The test presented statements by eight people of different backgrounds talking about a variety of issues (e.g., loneliness, suicide, jealousy, falling in love). Students were instructed to write one or two sentences which would be a helpful response to the person making the statement. The same form of the test was used for the pre-measure and the post-measure to control for variability in the problem statements.

Carkuff's (1969) revised five-point empathy scale was used by two independent judges to rate levels of empathy. Interjudge reliability for total empathy scores of each student was $r = .81$. Ratings were averaged for each student and divided by the number of statements to provide scores comparable with other research on empathy (Payne, Weiss, & Kapp, 1972; Payne & Woudenberg, 1978; Ritter, 1978).

For the students in the Helping Skills Course, scores on the Carkuff (1969) five-point scale were: pre $M = 1.29$, $SD = .325$; post $M = 2.36$, $SD = .476$. The average gain was +1.07, $t(20) = 5.94$, $p < .001$. The correlation of pre-post scores was $r = .327$.

On initial scores of empathy, there was no difference between students in the Helping Skills Course and control group students. Also there were no significant changes over time for the control group students, a finding consistent with previous studies (Payne & Woudenberg, 1978).

Data from a post-course questionnaire on objectives also revealed changes. Allowing for problems interpreting self-report data, students in the Helping Skills

Course reported statistically significant increases in 1) understanding Egan's model and concepts; 2) ability to use various helping skills; 3) awareness of self-as-helper; and 4) confidence in a helping situation. The greatest increase in a skill area was reported for "skill in using primary level accurate empathy;" This result is consistent with the fact that the most time was spent practicing that skill.

Non-quantifiable information was gathered from journal summaries, written course evaluations, self-evaluations of videotapes, and instructor evaluations of videotapes. Students reported a great amount of excitement and satisfaction with the course. They wrote that they had learned definite skills and had acquired a more realistic idea about the rewards and difficulties of being a helper.

Self-evaluations revealed that the students were able to evaluate their own helping skill level objectively, noting both positive and negative attributes. Students emphasized the importance of classroom practice in small groups. They valued receiving feedback in these groups and also the opportunity every week to be in the helpee role, being helped with their own problems. The students indicated clearly that they would benefit from a continuation of the course in order to develop and practice their helping skills.

Discussion and Implications

The pilot semester of a Helping Skills Course for undergraduates has been described and evaluated. Helping skills were taught as part of an academic program to complement traditional courses, fieldwork practica, and the growing demand by undergraduates for relevant training. In striking a balance between theory, self-awareness activities, and skills practice, the course was meaningful, and class sessions were active, involving, and exciting for students and instructor

alike. Results of research indicated that the students did in fact learn basic helping skills as well as an orientation to the helping process.

The nature of this Helping Skills Course increased the personal development of the students as they grew closer, became more self-disclosing, and received meaningful help from one another. The responsibilities and problems of being a helper were experienced in a context wherein they could be discussed. Students interested in the helping professions were able to get a "hands on" sense of helping in the relatively safe atmosphere of a classroom. This experience added to the actual helping experiences in the field, which usually have less opportunities for risk-taking and immediate feedback. Undergraduates who did not enter the helping professions took from the course certain basic skills which can be put to use in any career or social setting.

Although similar courses are regularly included in graduate programs for helping professionals (e.g., Ritter, 1978; Anthony, 1976), the results and reactions to this pilot course suggest that undergraduates also can learn from supervised classroom training in helping skills. Including such a course in undergraduate curricula would require that instructors modify graduate courses and/or be trained to teach such a subject to undergraduates. The politics of a changed conception of undergraduate education may continue the problems in definition met when efforts were first made to include fieldwork as part of the undergraduate curricula.

Further experimentation and evaluation of undergraduate skill development courses is necessary to create meaningful and relevant training programs and to validate the effects of such programs.

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